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Septuagisma (Epiphany 6) One Year Series 2017

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Septuagisma Sunday One Year Series

February 12, 2017

The “Gisma” Sundays which we have already noted are getting us ready for the Lenten season which begins on March 1 with Ash Wednesday. The two different lectionaries are thinking along the same lines. While the pre-Lent character of these last Sundays after the Epiphany is not repeated in the three year series, these readings show up frequently in the three year Lenten series – particularly on Lent 3 in series A. Thus, if you are preaching the 3 year series, be aware, these will come up in a few weeks.

The themes for this day are interesting. Moses strikes the rock and the Psalm and Paul reflect on that event most interestingly. The people complain but God provides water from an unusual source which only gets more unusual when you read Paul’s words. Jesus speaks of workers in the vineyard grumbling against the master for his largess.

Our Luther quote will draw our attention to the equanimity of God’s mercy to all, emperor and peasant alike. They both need and both get the same Jesus. Luther’s words were written shortly after the Peasant’s rebellion in 1524-5 in which Luther took the side of the establishment and order over against what he and others saw as the chaos and lawlessness of the peasant movement. There are echoes of that event in our readings and the preacher interested in Luther will want to look a little deeper into those terrible years and Luther’s role.

The preacher will want to keep his eyes focused on God giving people what they don’t deserve. The people grumble, the workers grumble, even Paul is disciplining his body lest he be disqualified. The whole economy of our relationship with God seems out of plumb, and it is. Jesus has worked that on a cross. It is not fair and is not what we deserved. God has done a wonderful thing for us.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequences of our sin may be mercifully delivered by your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

We have regularly pointed out that these prayers often have a different mindset than the larger culture. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than it is in this prayer. The phrase “we who justly suffer” is simply not in the vocabulary of most Americans. If anything, suffering is an occasion to get a bit of fame, to be noticed by someone who will preferably have deep pockets and give us something for our trouble. Several high profile incidents in Oregon over the past several years have highlighted individuals who have faked some terrible event to benefit from suffering. Suffering is time to call an attorney and make someone pay, if they won’t do it out of

sympathy. Suffering is so unjust that it is, at least in Oregon, occasion when we can legally procure enough barbiturates to end our own lives with the blessing of the state.

We who suffer justly – behind that phrase is an assumption which we need to address. There is justice, and suffering can be a just result, a proper result. There is a name for this idea:

Retributive Justice. Retributive justice suggests that for sin there should be a commensurate punishment. At the end of The Horse and His Boy by C. S. Lewis, the main characters are chased by a lion and one of them, Aravis, is clawed by the lion, leaving deep and painful gashes on her back. Later in the story when the other character, Cor/Shasta is wondering about that lion, Aslan admits that he is the lion. He says that Aravis received one scratch for every lash that her servant received when she covered up for her mistress' flight from her family. Aravis had done something wrong, her servant had been punished, and Aslan had balanced the scales with a literal version of the Lex Talionis.

Lewis also has an interesting exploration of retributive justice in That Hideous Strength. The forces of evil in that book are pushing “rehabilitation” instead of “retributive justice.” But while rehabilitation sounds so much better, it was actually much worse. The husband of one woman was kept in prison indefinitely because even though his sentence was complete he was deemed “unrehabilitated” and thus it was extended. Lewis points out that retributive justice may in fact be a way of limiting punishment.

But perhaps we don't buy the idea of retributive justice. Why then is there suffering? C. S. Lewis would be so convinced of the idea that, even though a protestant, he would actually float the idea that purgatory was a logical and perhaps possible idea for him. His sense of retributive justice meant that we did have some just suffering to undergo after death and before we were “fit” for heaven's peace and perfection. I am not quite ready to go that far down that road, but I still need to ask the question of suffering.

The prayer suggests that suffering is just. In what way is it just to suffer or conversely unjust not to suffer? One could suggest consequence as the mechanism here. If I stick my paper clip in the electrical socket to see what will happen, I will suffer, and it will not really be a punishment as much as it is simply a consequence of my rash behavior. Is that what we mean by justice? Is it simply that when you do something stupid, sometimes it will hurt?

This question actually is worth asking today as we come to these lessons. Moses will be confronted with a grumbling and contentious people. They were thirsty, So God sends Moses to strike a rock and water comes forth. Moses names the place Massah and Meribah, testing and quarreling. Do you suppose the water was a little bitter? Is our suffering sometimes the consequence of our own stupidity? Does that really explain our entrapment in the grave? Hardly, but the Psalm raises a really frightening possibility, especially in the two excised verses at the end of that Psalm. The Psalmist urges the reader/worshiper not to test God like their fathers did in the wilderness, an allusion to the event in Exodus. But we chop off the last two verses of the psalm in which God says he loathed that generation and that is why they did not get into the Promised Land. Does that explain our just suffering?

The preacher will want to think carefully about these things. The answer which does not take seriously the mystery and the holiness of this whole affair may well miss the fact that Jesus suffered, justly and unjustly, in the same cross. My sins demanded suffering, so in bearing them he justly suffered. Yet, they were not his sins, so his suffering was intensely unjust. What exactly does that mean?

Some years ago a discussion of this prayer led us into a discussion of prayer. When we pray, do we pray for God's rescue to come to us so that we may glorify Jesus' name? Do I pray for healing and put a period at the end of that sentence? Or do we pray for healing so that we may tell others about the goodness of God? It seems like an odd question, but why do we want the suffering to end? Is it purely for our own comfort? Really?

We wondered how we can talk to folks who are praying desperately for peace or help, but they don't seem to see it, especially in the face of suffering on the part of so many folk in other troubled places in the world. In Mexico the drug leaders are slaughtering young people who are not actually involved in the drug trade. In Nicaragua a Christian church gathered to a mass baptism at the sea, and some wave or something overcame them and they died. It seems so unjust. How could such a thing happen at a baptism? Are they justly suffering the consequences of their sins? The old problem of evil and a good God seems to be at work here.

We thought carefully about the way that we do pray. We wondered if when we pray are we letting God off the hook. Do we only ask for what we think can be or do we keep praying for the "impossible" understanding that nothing is impossible for God? What do we do in the face of profound disappointment when our prayers do not seem to be answered? The prayer suggests that this might be our fault. Is it? When we tell people that no is another answer, are we just telling them that they have messed up?

This is especially hard when we serve a community which is rocked by a tragedy. When a child dies, when a bridge collapses, or when some random act of death and suffering visits God did not make this happen.

Lou Bauer's former congregation had one little girl that was somewhat developmentally delayed and had some profound health problems. For three weeks she had been talking about how "Jesus was coming soon." And he did. One Friday morning her parents walked into her room to wake her and found that Jesus had carried her home. In the final weeks of her life, Jesus was making her into a great light for that congregation, as the prayer says, to the glory of his name.

Readings

Exodus 17:1-7

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

This reading falls on the third Sunday of Lent in series A. Hence we will be seeing this one again in a few weeks in the three year series. Here are edited notes from my discussion three years ago.

The wilderness of Sin is simply an accidental homonym in English. It is not related to the religious understanding of Sin.

The people are thirsty. Their reaction to this reality seems odd. They had received manna and quail in the chapter before. They crossed the Red Sea in chapter 14. Why not just ask, but instead they accuse. Moses’ response to this is also most strange. What are they supposed to do if there is no water? Perhaps the quarreling is the issue here, but the request seems like something reasonable. The concluding verse says they are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking what God will do, they question whether the Lord is in this place. Did they follow the wrong pillar of cloud? These Exodus and Numbers stories often paint the Israelites into a strange caricature of almost child-like obstinacy.

Moses in turn throws this into the teeth of God. He doesn’t fare any better in these stories.

God in turn comes with a solution. Moses takes the staff and with God standing before him, on the rock, draws water from the rock. The words for quarrelling and testing have a sense of bitterness about them. It seems to have been pretty hard water that came from the rock. They did not name it “sweetness” and “refreshment.”

What to make of this. This is very early in the exodus event. The people in the immediate chapters before crossed the red sea and escaped Pharaoh. They have eaten manna in chapter 16, yet they get to a waterless place and they wonder if God has evil intent or if God can help them in this dry place. How stupid can they be? They have seen God inflict plagues and bring blessings which astounded them. Yet, they wonder if God can show up with a little water when they are thirsty.

Of course, the same can be said of us. How often don’t we experience the blessings of God and then immediately start to question the goodness of God when life gets a little tough, when times of testing come to us. We are not that different from these people as we would like to imagine. Like petulant teenagers who slam the door on the bedroom that their father has purchased for

them, wearing the clothes that their father has purchased for them, driving their father's car on his gas, we can rail against the mean-ness of God if things don't go our way.

God's goodness to us is a matter of grace. The people don't know how to ask, but God gives them what they need anyway. Don't look to us, not even to our gratefulness for an efficient cause of God's grace. He is not reacting to anything in us that moves him to love us. He does not find something attractive in you or me, not even faith. He delights in the good you do, he loves the praises you sing, but that is not why he loves you. He smiles upon our endeavors to please him and encourages them. He would that we do more, but this is not why he loves us. The crude drawings my toddlers brought to me were indeed precious, but not for their artistic value, but because they were gifts born of love for me. God delights to see the love he has given returned, even in our crude attempts at goodness. And when the toddlers screamed and pouted, I loved them then too. God's love does not evaporate because we have failed to love him in return very well. It just doesn't depend on us at all. It is his majestic gift to give, and he gives it freely, to the humble and the proud, to sinners of every stripe. We have often heard that God loves the whole world, even the stinkers. That is really good news because too often I have been a stinker.

Psalm 95:1-9

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

³ For the LORD is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down;

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷ For he is our God,

and we are the people of his pasture,

and the sheep of his hand.

Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ when your fathers put me to the test

and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation

and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,

and they have not known my ways.”

¹¹ *Therefore I swore in my wrath,
“They shall not enter my rest.”*

You can see why they might have lopped those last two verses off this psalm for worship purposes. But I think the preacher and worship planner needs to keep them in mind, if for no other reason than the inquisitive worshipper may notice it and have a question. But the preacher has another reason to keep this in mind. This is Law, hard Law. When the preacher sees hard Law like that he will start to look for really potent Gospel.

For those of you who still sing Matins or remember singing it. This psalm forms the basis for the ancient Christian hymn we call simply “Venite” which is the first word in Latin. If you have not sung it in a while, you might just dig it out. It is quite permissible to sing it any time, even on Sunday between readings.

I Corinthians 9:24-10:5

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

This reading appears in part on third Sunday of Lent in Series C. There it does not include the material from chapter 9 and continues further into chapter 10. Here is an excerpt from those notes with some new material.

The first paragraph fits well into this period of preparing the hearer for Lenten discipline. Paul speaks of disciplining his body, something to which anyone who has spent time in a health club or gym can relate. But the point Paul is trying to make is not simply one of spiritual health. One can be “disqualified” by the undisciplined body. Paul does not speak as if everyone will win the race, but he speaks of running as if one is committed to its goals, to its end. For Paul this means that his whole self is at God’s disposal. Paul’s actions are not aimless or pointless, but are aimed by God and pointed toward God’s ends.

This then brings us to the second paragraph of this pericope, the opening words of the following chapter in I Corinthians. The “for” at the beginning of that passage suggests that Paul’s injunction to self-discipline is not a trivial thing – he connects it to the exodus narrative.

Paul tells his Corinthian congregation that their fathers were all under the cloud, passed through the sea, etc. But these are all gentiles, they are not Jews, or at least a fair number of them. But Paul can call them children of those Exodus Israelites through faith (see Galatians 3 among other places.) He doesn't even need to explain that here, but perhaps it does merit a little closer attention on our part. That assertion is in itself profound Gospel. Abraham is our father, we are the descendants, spiritually, of the men and women who passed through that sea, even though we may have little or no genetic inheritance from them. By faith, these are our people.

But then things get weird. His recapitulation of the Exodus event includes a few details I missed out on in my Old Testament introduction class. It is essential here to remember that Paul, prior to his conversion, had been educated as a rabbinic Jew. He did not perceive of his conversion to Christianity as a departure from his previously held faith, but as a completion or a fulfillment of that faith. He did not stop being a Jew, instead he became a Jew whose messiah had already come.

The Rabbis of the first and subsequent centuries used an interpretational technique which we don't find as palatable, but is still practiced in some quarters of Christianity today and was wide spread among the Church fathers. They read it "literally" not in the sense that all of us read literally after the enlightenment, but in another, highly religious sense. They believed that every word, every stroke of the pen, was in fact inspired. Thus a word that was present or not present could have tremendous importance. In Jewish communities as they read the Torah this was practiced with considerable rigor. Every text was scrutinized with great detail, argued about, and back stories were created to explain why the text said it this way or that way. These back stories were called Midrash and were considered somewhat authoritative, although not with the same authority as the Bible.

Paul is quoting and using one of these midrash stories in this passage. In the accounts of the Exodus it says that the people of Israel drank water from the rock which Moses struck. This is recorded in Exodus 17, immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. But then again, much later in the narrative, a similar story is told in Numbers 20. Our occidental minds simply read this and assume that another rock was struck. But the oriental mind of a literal reading Jewish rabbi does not think that way. Because the definite article is used and the rock is described as "the" rock, the Jewish interpreters of Paul's day assumed it was the same rock. They are in different places, but this simply must mean that the rock followed them around in the desert. This explanation was eventually accepted and became a midrash.

Paul is quoting this midrash in the first paragraph, but Christianizing it by saying that the rock which followed them was actually Jesus. It made sense to him. For us, however, the question is "what is this doing in my Bible?" It also makes us wonder about just how authoritatively this speaks. Do I have to accept that if I am someone who believes in the inspiration of Scripture? Does this mean that I should be reading the midrashes of Judaism to mine for other truths and accurate observations about the Torah? Fortunately there is a little room to have a discussion

here, but it is not always an easy discussion. For people who have cut their theological teeth on the bromides of fundamentalism, this conversation will be almost impossible.

But what is the preacher to say about this? The text is filled with warnings and can work the Law powerfully on the hearer. We are regularly told by physicians and culture that we are not disciplining our bodies well enough. We look in the mirror and then at the toned bodies of celebrities and discover that we are deficient in the workout category. Paul's words about a failure to discipline the body disqualifying us may land a devastating blow on the sinner who takes them to heart.

The preacher may well want to read carefully the notes which Luther provides below and which speak of the fact that they all passed through the sea and they all ate and drank the same spiritual food and drink. There may lie a great blessing for your people.

Sermon Idea: He follows us through the wilderness (That the Spirit of God would open the hearer's heart to recognize the presence of Christ in his/her life right now.)

(This is a sermon is based on one we developed the last time this reading came up in the three year series)

The OT lesson today tells us the story of God providing water for the people from a rock. Here was life pouring out of an unlikely place – a stone. In a dry and desert place, one would not look for water there. But God did it. The people doubted, complained, and grumbled. Moses even seems to have wondered what could happen, but God, with all his amazing power, was right there. But what this sermon wants the hearer to notice that God did not show up when the water gushed forth. He was there when they were drinking from the regular wells too. God had been there and will be there the whole time.

Paul, however, gives us the theme for this message. Jesus is a rock that follows God's people around through the wilderness. God is faithful, like that rock that followed them through the desert of long ago. They were difficult and hard to get along with, but that rock kept following them, God never stopped loving them. We have often struggled with our own sins, but God has never stopped loving us. The next time we face that sin, though we have often succumbed in the past, God will be right there to help that day too. The Israelites are an excellent example for us. They never really did get over that complaining problem. God got pretty weary of it, we read at several junctures, but he never just left them to perish in the wilderness. Yes, they wandered for a generation, but with God's presence.

And then Jesus comes to us in this amazing Gospel lesson. He is not apparently keeping any score according to the measures we expect. The workers who have worked a little get the same as the one who works a great deal. He has no sliding scale of his presence or his love.

The preacher who proclaims this presence of Christ will assert that this is real – sacramentally real. It is not just a pious thought or a nice idea, but we are talking about a genuine presence. The Jesus who showed up in the upper room did not break in; he was there the whole time.

The preacher who is thinking about the presence of Christ may want to remember that the person who is going through the difficult time does not perceive the presence of Christ in the middle of the stress, but in looking back one can see his gentle presence in many different ways. You can assure the person going through garbage in his/her life that this feeling of God's absence is real and normal. That feeling is not a sign of his absence but a reality of your suffering. Jesus' words from the cross will be critical here. He too felt that feeling. You have been there too, and you can also tell them that it will get better. There will come a day when you can look back on it and see him and his love again. This is not a license for the sinner to delay, but it is comfort for the suffering person.

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Luther

1. This is a rather subtle Gospel lesson; young folks and mean-spirited people will learn very little here. Nevertheless, since it's read on this Sunday, we'll go through it quickly and say something about it.

2. It's about a householder who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard, agreeing with them on the usual wage...afterwards he hired others who worked nine hours; still later, some who worked six, and others three hours; and finally some who labored only one hour. But in the evening, he paid these last ones the same on denarius that he had promised those whom he had hired early in the morning. The hours worked varied greatly, but the wages were the same! ...each worker received exactly the same amount! That's the parable.

Now obviously, such a standard would not be acceptable in ordinary labor relations; it just wouldn't be fair. In the marketplace, there's a different measure and rule: He who labors hard and long gets higher wages; he who works less gets, comparatively, less pay. And yet, even here, if a worker does receive his agreed upon wage, he really has no reason to grumble if his employer – out of the goodness of his heart – wants to reward some other worker with a little extra. In principle, however, it is not right to pay equal wages for disproportionate labor.

3. The Lord told the parable in this fashion so as to distinguish clearly between his kingdom and the worldly realm, and thus to remind us that his kingdom operates with principles different from the standards of the world. On the worldly scene there can be no equality simply because people themselves are so diverse. That's why, as a general rule, he who has labored more, also receives more pay...What one person gets as a free gift, cannot be claimed as a right by the next party. Case in point: the owner of the house has much more property than his servant, even though the servant puts in more physical labor than his employer. Such disparity exists of necessity in the worldly realm. In Christ's kingdom, however, there should be no such difference. All are to be equal, one the same as the other; each to have and be "worth" as much as the next one.

4. Outwardly, then, there is a difference; inequality will and must remain in the public domain simply because of the diversity of professions and occupations. A farmer's lifestyle is different from that of the townsman, a prince occupies a different role than a nobleman; here there's a lot of inequality – and it needs to stay that way! In Christ's kingdom, however – be it king, prince, lord, servant, wife, maid, or whatever – all of them are equal! None has a different baptism, gospel, faith, sacrament, or a different Christ and God. Together they all go to church; servant, townsman, farmer all hear the same Word as the lord, prince, and nobleman hear. The baptism I have is the same one that any little maid receives; the faith Peter and Paul had is the same faith Magdalene and the thief on the cross had; as Christians you and I also have it. John the Baptist's God and Christ is the same one every repentant sinner has! Here, then, all are the same, even though the one is higher or lower as far as his worldly status, office, or talents are concerned.

5. All this we need diligently to learn, so that we can rightly distinguish Christ's kingdom from all worldly realms. This is surely a very comforting Gospel for us Christians, that all of us are so wonderfully equal in Christ! As far as the world concerned, differences remain: a father is more than the son; the lord more than the servant; the king and the prince more than his subjects. That's the will of God; he himself has created and arranged all this diversity. Whoever now wants to "equalize" everyone, so that the servant counts for as much as his master, the maid as much authority as her mistress, and the peasant as much as a prince, that would indeed be a spectacular accomplishment – as we recently saw in the case of the rebellious peasants! And so let the world operate with its inequality as best it can. We will continue to take comfort in the fact – our station being high or low – that we all have one Christ, one baptism, one gospel, one Spirit. No one has a better gospel, a better baptism, a different or better Christ, or a different or better heaven – we are all equal!

7. Whoever, then, has this conviction that we are all equal in Christ can go about his daily work with joy, whether he occupies a lesser place and position than someone else will not trouble him during his brief sojourn here on earth. He will understand that in his daily life there must needs be inequality – one

having much, another little; one a lord, the other a servant. A Christian will not let this disturb him; instead he will go ahead in the name of God, knowing that here on earth it cannot be otherwise. Even if I have a more arduous station in life than the lord or lady of the house, even if I'm not as powerful as a prince, king, or emperor, I'm not going to grumble about it, but instead will gladly and willingly remain in my place until God himself promotes me to be a lord or lady. Meanwhile, I have the comfort of knowing that neither emperor or king, pope or bishop, have a different Christ, or more of him, than I. In truth, the pope doesn't have what I have! I am cleansed by the blood of the Christ who sits at God's right hand – something the pope disavows.

Sermon Idea: We all get the same (That the hearer of this sermon would embody the Kingdom of God in his/her everyday relationships)

At first this sermon and theme seem to be at odds with the content of Luther's notes above. He is very carefully admitting that there are real differences in the world. He even goes so far as to say that this is ordained by God and needs to be. This is true. We are not talking about overturning social order here and making everyone equal in the sense of the Peasant Revolt of the 16th century or some of the protesters who have taken to the streets of our cities in the last couple of months.

But this sermon wants to break down a little of the artificial barrier that Luther properly recognizes but which can also serve as a miserable excuse for acquiescing to the injustice of the world. I will not create some egalitarian utopia and don't even have that as a goal. But I want to be a spot of God's kingdom in this inherently unfair realm of the world. I want my hearers to see that while they live in the realm of the world they also are citizens of this strange kingdom of God which operates under a wholly different set of rules and which estimates the worth of people through a very different lens.

The world will make miserable value judgments about people. Some place us on an economic scale in which the impoverished are either at fault or to be pitied for their poverty. We can place people on a body image scale in which the obese and the less attractive sit lower on a scale in which models and the leading men and women of Hollywood occupy the top. There are people who wield power and some who do not. There are those whose hour of time is worth far more than the day laborer. But there are also gross injustices in this system. Does the CEO of some of our companies really merit thousands of dollars of an hour compared to the minimum wage of the people who are standing at the cash registers or even the \$40/hour of the man on the assembly line?

We are not trying to make everyone equal, but we are also noticing that there is another kingdom at work in us and therefore in the world which pays no attention to these scales of value which are so important to so many. Jesus has given the same love, forgiveness, and even heaven itself to prince and pauper, CEO and janitor. And there is a place in our lives in which we operate out of that reality. The wealthy sinner gets no pass nor does the poor man when it comes to sin.

Interestingly, we can flip the standard on its head and just create another inequity in this regard. The poor man can become the righteous victim and the banker the villain, but have we really changed a thing, not really. Jesus has always died for both, loves both, forgives both, and the Christian gets to say and act that way.

As we say above, that does not dissolve all the differences. The banker will still drive a much better car and live a little higher on the hill than the man who works for the security company that makes sure the doors are locked in the branch down the street. But both of them are objects of Christ's love expressed in Word, Sacrament, and through us. Just as Jesus does not give them a different baptism or a different Lord's Supper, he doesn't send them a different person, but he sends us to be the living invitations to his gracious kingdom.

There are strong voices of division which are at work in our world right now. Some hate the president, others love him, but God loves the lot, including the president. Our public discourse, denuded of religion by the enlightenment, is in desperate need of religion right now, the kingdom of God which looks at political foes and friends and sees first and foremost the people for whom God has died on a cross. Here lies a means to temper the rhetoric. We need not agree, but we can agree or disagree inside that religious evaluation of the other. I am not suggesting that we urge the de-secularization of the public square. That would also be simply another way to divide. What I am suggesting is that Christians start to live in that square as if their religion mattered for the way that they conduct all their business, all their dialogues, and all their politics.

This equality stands at the very heart of our religion. Our world needs it right now.

For a very different commentary on Matthew 20, here are my notes from 2014 when this reading was heard on Proper 20 in Series A, toward the end of September. I extended the reading by a few verses and include them here as well.

¹⁷ And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸ "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

Here we have another parable of Jesus, and this one is really designed to deliver a shot right to the solar plexus of our human pride and the self-righteousness to which Christians are especially prone. Robert Capon has a marvelous retelling of this story as if the owner of the vineyard is Robert Mondavi which is really worth reading if you have his little books on parables. They have now been bound into one text: Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment This is a book which deserves a spot on every preacher's reading list. .

The basic gist of the parable is that the grace of God is somewhat scandalous. He loves people and gives them his heaven and his blessing in a rather prodigal way, especially for those of us

who have been slogging along in the pews, serving on committees, tithing, teaching Sunday School, and setting up the altar every week. .

For the Christian, the guy or gal who has served on the committees and the altar guild and eaten burned pancakes at the Easter breakfast because they ran out of the good ones, this comes as a terrible shock. God is not really counting my good deeds. He is not noticing what I have done, at least not like I want him to. He sees it alright and in a sense takes pleasure there, but when it comes to grace, it is grace and not for sale. My good works don't really buy anything when it comes to God. He loves the good deeds which done for our Father. Because we love doing them these deeds really are a delight to him, but when it comes to opening up heaven, they are not part of the picture. We are admitted on the same plan as the guy who has the deathbed conversion and had been married six times before he died. It doesn't seem fair, and in one sense it is not, but this is God's gift to give and he gets to give it like he wants and we are not really in a position to complain. Yes, we did indeed work hard, but did we do it to earn something? Then we were deceived. Did we do it because we love Him? Then why are we looking for a payment? It makes sense, but it also galls. There is no suitable explanation of this. For the one who believes, the kingdom really needs no explanation, for the one who does not believe, there is no explaining this. Even so, the Christian often finds that he would really like that explanation. People can take this rather seriously. A parishoner once threatened to kill my father because he had confirmed the wrong sorts of folks, the sorts of folks who did not belong in Church.

Perhaps the problem here is that we think that Christians are not these vineyard workers. Just because we have been baptized does not mean that the old man simply goes away. Paul struggled with him and we do too. We need to preach Law and Gospel to these guys too. We simply are the vineyard workers. Grace is scandalous!

Another way to express this is that we have a very difficult time imagining that God would love us completely out of his grace. We imagine that there is something about us that is just even a little bit more loveable than the fellow down the street. That is why I am a Christian and they are not. Perhaps it is even the fact that I go to Church on Sunday and throw my offering in the plate when it passes my pew. This is why I am saved and the other is not. I have done something right, even if it is to say that I am not worthy, at least I said that much properly and therefore I get the "go to heaven" sticker on my casket.

What must I do to go to heaven? Most Christians would say something about confessing Christ. But the truth is, to go to heaven, we must die. We are all rather good at that. Jesus will take care of the rest. I don't want to denigrate the confession, but if we understand even that good thing as a purchase of God's favor, we have completely missed this point.

But if we confess grace, real grace, then my salvation is utterly outside of my purchasing power, it is a result of God's decision, God's action, God's motive, purely without respect to me. Then why me and not that guy down the street who mows his lawn every Sunday morning or is out drinking late on Saturday? I don't know. Today's parable suggests that it might just be me and

him. And it if is really the both of us who get to go to heaven, why should I sit through another voters meeting?

The preacher who preaches this sermon has to be a little uncomfortable. If you take away all the reward motivation for being part of the Christian mission, why should folks volunteer to serve, give money, or offer their time and talent? This question has vexed the Church for a very long time. Many at the time of Luther thought he would ruin the Church for this very reason. If they took away the economy of salvation in which God recognized our deeds and rewarded us for them, would people still do good deeds? I hate to say it, but they had a point. The medieval Christians built massive cathedrals and more. That all came to a crashing halt with the Reformation's emphasis on grace alone. Luther rather expected that Grace alone would move Christians to do more, not less. But has it really played out? Can Lutherans give more than 2% of their income with a purely Gospel motivation? I haven't seen too many of them who have pulled it off. I wonder what a whole congregation of them might look like?

Yet, Jesus also preached a parable about a Sower and different sorts of soil. When the seed does connect and the Gospel does take root and bear fruit, it can bear fruit 30, 60, and even 100 fold! Have you ever seen that? You might want to have an illustration of that.

We don't want to preach against good works here. That also puts out outside the Confessions. I Corinthians 15:58 – our work has value – it is not in vain. Stand firm in your faith, let nothing move you from that, not even the scandal of sharing a hymnal with a guy who stumbled through the door and is now communing at the same table as you, without ever putting in the work that you did. Your work and his work are not to be compared, either negatively on his part, or positively on your part, they are all rendered meaningless and meaningful in light of that central reality, which is Jesus.

Sermon Idea: “My Pictures are on God's Refrigerator” (That the Spirit of God would fill the hearer with joy at being in God's kingdom, his vineyard.)

I am thinking of children's art here with this title. You know the art, the crudely drawn figures, the flowers all in a row, the sun with the smiling face. It is beautiful to the parent, but it never will be confused with a Van Gogh.

Somewhere I fit into that parable of the workers in the vineyard. There is always someone who has put in more time than me and who has done more or done it better. Likewise I am not the sort of person who has made that deathbed conversion of the reprobate, but I am somewhere between, perhaps one of those mid morning hires, maybe somewhere on the tail end of the afternoon. What does that really matter? Here I am working the vineyard of my beloved Lord and Master Jesus. He has taken my humble works and put them on his refrigerator. Perhaps they

are better than some other Christians, perhaps they are not, in any event, he loves mine and he loves theirs. That is enough for me. It gives meaning and purpose to my life.

What is taking the joy from our folks? What keeps our people from seeing this? How will we proclaim the Law here? How do we think that God is critically looking at my life or my service? How do I think he is looking at the lives/service of others? How does that competitive Christianity show up? Can we imagine a world in which we are not competitive about some of this? This can show up in a number of ways. The person who is effectively a deist is convinced that God does not see my work. He is distant and far away. The alternative seems to be a sort of works righteousness in which God is very concerned about my good deeds, keeps a record, and there are consequences, rewards, and punishments. But is there another way to think about this? Can I see what I do differently?

Is Augustine's comment on "rest" at the beginning of these notes perhaps helpful? Do we want simply to point to the restlessness of our folks? We cannot rest unless we rest in God. This can even be seen in the way I go to Church or serve in the church. I can begrudgingly attend, I can woefully serve, because no one else will.

This means that I can render service joyfully to God, and it means that I can see the service of my neighbor in a new light. My years spent on a committee or multiple committees are received by God, not as a payment but as a loving sacrifice. Likewise the conversion of the sinner is a delight to God, not as a payment, no one is keeping score, but my life is the same loving sacrifice. When I am at the center of my world, this is a scandal, but when my world centers on the Jesus this is wonderful.

This also means that when Jesus opens a door for me to serve, I can jump in there with joy. And when he opens twenty doors before me, I can say no to some and yes to others, knowing that his love and gracious presence will receive this too. I don't ever have to wonder if someone has done more or if I have done enough. The enough happened on a cross long ago, the rest of this is something else, this is love rebounding between God and me and everyone else.

This is a true and Christian joy, the sort of Joy that not even prison could take away from Paul. He could serve God there too. He could look out through the bars and see the Gospel preached and, though he longed to be out there doing it too, he could rejoice because Christ was preached. It wasn't about Paul anymore, it was about Jesus, and that made him glad.

Here is the art on the refrigerator. It is not great in and of itself. In fact, it would never sell at a gallery. But because it is my work, because God loves me, he delights in it. It is not about a buy and sell or value, but it is about God's love for the child (me) who did the deed, drew the picture, and gave it to him looking for a smile.

Remember this can be a scary sermon for the preacher to preach. If this is really outside the economy of earning God's favor, then why come to church and serve? What if they listen to me and no one shows up next week? But we will point to the joy of it. And that is a far more important motivator than any obligation. Our work is a delight to God (see the II Corinthians

quote above) and that is a reason all to itself. Paul's life is the sermon. Our life will also be a sermon here. Why do we do this? Surely not for the glory of being a Deacon or a Pastor! What brings us back? It is the love of God rebounding back and forth, that is the only way thing which can explain this. Why does the suitor do what he does? He is in love.

Sermon Idea: Why on earth are we working so hard? (That the Holy Spirit would empower the hearer to a life of service which is not looking for God's reaction but which is simply living out the beautiful gift of Jesus who lives in us.)

This sermon would help us see that what we do is not looking for some reward from God. He is not reacting to us. Rather, having picked us up in Baptism, God has dwelt with us, and now he gives me the joyful place in his kingdom. I am not earning something. I have already been given everything.

That could be an excuse to do nothing, but that is not what really happens. Indeed, the love of God dwelling in us actually moves us to far more than any buy/sell motivation. We will do far more for the people we love than we ever will for the folks who coerce money out of us (thinking the utility company).

This sermon wants to see what we are doing, and notice that God has called it into being, he supports it, and he has put us into that.